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# Services for the Blind In Arkansas

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# THE ARKANSAS HISTORICAL QUARTERLY

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## SERVICES FOR THE BLIND IN ARKANSAS

By  
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*Fayetteville, Arkansas*

THE BLIND AND PARTIALLY BLIND are a small segment of society, numbering about 250,000 in the United States; but they are a conspicuous element because of the achievements of some and the sympathetic appeal of others. The blind beggar is proverbial, and the blind themselves have taken measures to curb begging by the blind because it discourages people from giving honest jobs to them. There are between 3,500 and 5,000 blind persons in Arkansas. About 500 persons in the State may be expected to lose their sight each year.

There are no blind as a class, just as there are no White People as a class. There are old, young, sick, well, ignorant, educated, good, and bad blind persons. Any adequate program for the blind must take these differences into consideration.

There is a popular misconception that blindness sharpens the other senses. This is not true; in fact, whatever caused the blindness in the first place often dulled the other senses. The apparently keener sense of hearing, smell, or touch which the blind may possess is asquired only by long and tedious training.

Blindness is one of the more hopeful of the social problems from the standpoint of prevention because of the recent discovery of remedies for several of the causes most

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frequently leading to blindness. Trachoma and inflammation of the eyes of the newborn should be mentioned especially in this connection.

Arkansas has several laws and social programs designed to prevent blindness or to restore vision. One of these is a law requiring every physician or midwife to put one or two drops of a 2 per cent solution of silver nitrate into the eyes of every infant immediately after birth. It is also required that the birth certificate state whether or not a prophylactic drug was used in the baby's eyes and list the name of the drug.

The law creating the State Department of Public Welfare required it to develop or cooperate with other agencies in developing measures for the prevention of blindness and the restoration of eyesight. Under this clause the Trachoma Control Work and the Remedial Eye Service have been developed.

*Trachoma Control Work.* The first trachoma clinic in the State was arranged by the Department of Public Welfare and was held in August, 1939, in Jonesboro. It was followed closely by clinics in Mountain Home, Fort Smith, and Russellville. This work was taken over by the State Board of Health as communicable disease control work in the latter part of 1940, but the clinics have remained a co-operative project of the Department of Public Welfare and the State Board of Health, with the latter taking the major responsibility. The county health units are notified of the date set for a clinic by the Communicable Disease Division of the State Board of Health. Medicine and nursing services are supplied by the local health unit, but needed surgery is provided by the Welfare Department.

The county staffs of the Department of Public Welfare cooperate with the health units in finding persons with trachoma and teaching them how to take measures against the spread of the disease. They advise the patient and those in contact with him of the benefits of attending a clinic as often and as long as the trachoma clinician recommends. The county director also works with the public health unit, county officials, and civic organizations in providing transportation to and from the clinics.

Clinics have been held in 49 counties and over 7,000 cases have been diagnosed and treated. During the fiscal year 1946-47 there were 8,293 persons examined and 32 lid operations performed in these clinics. Trachoma has almost been eliminated as a cause of new cases of blindness. Each year it has become necessary to perform fewer and fewer operations. In 1942 there were 490 trachoma operations performed as compared to 35 in 1946.

In 1948, the Department of Public Welfare made a study of the causes of blindness based on the April pay roll. This showed there had been a decrease in the percentage of blindness caused by infectious disease during the last seven years. In October, 1941, 39.2% of the blindness of the Aid to Blind case load was caused by infectious disease, while in April, 1948, this percentage was reduced to 31%. The two infectious diseases which are predominantly responsible for blindness are trachoma and syphilis. Trachoma as a cause of blindness, both old and new, was reduced from 15.9% in 1941 to 13.1% in 1948. Syphilis as a cause of blindness was reduced from 11% to 8.16% in this time.

*Remedial Eye Service.* This service is provided by the State Department of Public Welfare for those in need of treatment either to prevent blindness or to restore eyesight. All of the funds for this program are supplied by the State. During the fiscal year 1947-48, there were 289 such operations performed, treatment was authorized for 14, and refractions and glasses were authorized for 244 persons.

Measures which cure or prevent syphilis and accident prevention programs also reduce the number of blind persons. Corneal transplants have created considerable interest during the past few years.

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Blindness is now chiefly a problem of the adult, often the aged, since a higher percentage of persons lose their sight after adulthood than before. Economically the blind have been the most handicapped of any group, but recent interest in the blind is helping them overcome this. After a well-rounded adjustment, blindness becomes simply an in-



convenience.

Some of the programs offering help, financial or otherwise, to blind persons are financed from funds obtained from the state or federal governments and are known as public agencies, while others are supported by contributions from individuals or groups and are known as private agencies. The major state agencies in Arkansas are the Arkansas School for the Blind, the State Department of Public Welfare, and the Vocational Rehabilitation Division of the State Board of Vocational Education.

*Arkansas School for the Blind:* This is one of the oldest of our state institutions and one of the best. The Arkansas school is rated as one of the three outstanding schools for the blind in the United State.

In February, 1850, the Reverend James Chaplain, a blind Methodist minister at Clarksville, recognized the need and gathered together five pupils to start what was probably the first formal teaching of the blind in the State. However, after 4 or 5 months of tiresome effort, endless discouragement, and practically no financial support the Reverend Chaplain was forced to discontinue his school.

It was not until February, 1859, that the Reverend Haucke a blind Baptist minister, was able to open a school in Arkadelphia known as the "Institute for the Education of the blind." The following month Governor Conway appointed a board of Trustees and the institution was incorporated. It was still only a charity institution, but the people of the State desired it sufficiently to subscribe with the help of the citizens of Arkadelphia, \$1,600 for the maintenance of the institution.

Mr. Otis Patton, a blind man, is really responsible for the early progress of the school. Made superintendent in December, 1859, he worked with Mr. Isaac Lawrence to advance the school and in 1861 secured the passage of a small legislative appropriation. The story of Mr. Patton's struggle during those 5 years to keep the school in operation with an amazingly small amount of money, practically no equipment and staff, and finally having to close the school for 3 years because of the danger of the Civil War

is indeed an account of sacrifices and hardship.

Still under the direction of Mr. Patton, the school was moved to Little Rock in 1868, so that its central location would better enable all blind persons in the state to attend. The name of the school was changed in 1879 to the "Arkansas School for the blind." In 1885 provision was made by the legislature for the erection of permanent buildings. The laying of the cornerstone, with Masonic ceremonies began the real history of the Arkansas School for the Blind—a history which has seen that first student body of 28 and that small faculty grow into a valuable institution for blind education.

This institution eventually outgrew its plant on 18th and Center streets, which it occupied for over 50 years; and the 1937 legislature appropriated \$150,000 for the erection of a new set of buildings to be located on the west end of the ground of the School for the Deaf on West Markham Street in Little Rock. With the aid of labor from the Works Progress Administration and an additional appropriation by the 1939 legislature of \$30,000, the new buildings were completed. Evacuation of the old plant was completed in August, 1939.

More adequate vocational facilities were needed, and the legislature of 1941 appropriated \$8,000 for the construction of a home economics cottage and an addition to the boys' vocational building. With the aid of labor from the Works Progress Administration these buildings were completed. The boys vocational building houses the mattress department and a finishing room for the woodworking department. The most recent addition to the boys' department is a modern vocational rabbitry consisting of 45 hutches and a poultry unit which will accommodate 800 broilers. The home economics cottage is equipped and organized on the home management plan. The advanced home economics girls live in the cottage under the supervision of an instructor. A large outside skating rink has been constructed on the girls' side of the campus. This rink is 50x80 feet with an incline on the inside and outside edges to aid the students in staying on the rink.

The general control of the school is by a five member



board appointed by the governor and confirmed by the senate for staggered terms of 5 years each. The board selects the superintendent, who appoints the other employees. All teachers in the literary department must hold a first-grade certificate, a professional license, or a state license. There are about 45 paid personnel at the school.

The school cares for and educates blind persons between the ages of 6 and 26 years who are capable of education. It furnishes suitable board, lodging, and instruction. The school has an "A" rating and offers grade and high school education with broad vocational work. The following trades are taught: leathercraft, fabric mats, rubber link mats, brush making, woodwork, piano tuning and repairing, vending stand operation, broom making, chair caning, furniture weaving, mattress making, and rabbit and poultry raising. Typing, dictaphone operation, homemaking, music, and cosmetology are also taught. The cosmetology instructor is an experienced operator and teacher. The course is useful for self improvement and as a possible vocation. There is an extensive social adjustment program, a physical education program and sight-saving classes. The parents, or if they are unable, interested individuals, clubs, etc. furnish clothing and transportation to the school.

Application for admission is made to the superintendent. The child must be free from any infectious disease and its vision must be so defective that it is unable to secure an education in the ordinary school. The school has a capacity for 140 students and an average attendance of 120.

*Negro Blind.* A new school for the Negro blind and deaf was ready for occupancy in September, 1948. It is located at 20th and Madison streets in Little Rock and is modern in every respect with all necessary accommodations for living and teaching contained in the three story "T" shaped building. The legislature of 1947 appropriated \$200,000 for its construction.

Space for the deaf is provided in one wing and for the blind in the other wing. Classrooms are in the center section and one kitchen furnishes food for both the blind and deaf dining rooms. The facilities will accommodate 90 to 100 blind and deaf children and living space for all necessary



personnel.

This will allow the acceptance of any eligible blind or deaf Negro child in Arkansas, which has not previously been the case. The buildings being abandoned at 11th and Battery Street would accommodate only about 25 blind, and those for the deaf about 40.

With the construction of proper physical facilities, the academic and vocational programs for Negro blind can and will be greatly expanded. It is hoped that all eligible children will apply for admission.

*Aid to Blind Program.* The adult blind is one of the groups for which special provision is made by the Department of Public Welfare under the general supervision of the Federal Security agency. Funds for this purpose are obtained from both the federal and state governments.

Any applicant is entitled to this type of assistance who:

- (1) Is 16 years of age or over;
- (2) Is not receiving an old age assistance grant;
- (3) Has resided in Arkansas continuously for one year immediately preceding the date of application, or has lost his sight while residing in the state (specified residence in county is not required);
- (4) Is not an inmate of any tax-supported institution at the time of receiving assistance (an inmate of such an institution may, however, make application, but the assistance grant, if given, shall not begin until after he ceases to be an inmate);
- (5) Has no vision or whose vision, with correcting glasses, is so defective as to prevent the performance of ordinary activities for which eyesight is essential (no application shall be approved until the applicant has been examined by an ophthalmologist designated or approved by the State Welfare Department to make such examination);
- (6) Has not made an assignment or transfer of property for the purpose of rendering himself

eligible for assistance grants at any time within 2 years immediately prior to the filing of the application for assistance;

- (7) Has not sufficient income or other resources to provide a reasonable subsistence compatible with "decency and health."

Any person who believes himself eligible for aid to blind may apply at the county welfare office, which is usually located in the county courthouse. If the applicant is unable to go to the office, the county visitor, on request, will call at his home and take the application. The applicant must produce proof of eligibility. If he does not have such proof, the welfare worker assists him in getting this material.

Applicants for aid to the blind must submit to an examination by a licensed ophthalmologist, approved by the supervising ophthalmologist of the State Welfare Department. To be eligible for assistance on the point of defective vision, the applicant must show a central visual acuity of less than 20/200 in the better eye with correcting glasses. This is generally considered an economic blindness. The fee of \$2 allowed the physician for each examination is paid by the State Welfare Department. The county director advises the applicant of the nearest approved ophthalmologist.

In January, 1949, there were 1,179 persons in Arkansas receiving aid to blind. The average grant per person was about \$24.56 a month.

*Adjustment Program for the Blind.* This program carried on by the Department of Public Welfare has been in existence only 3 years. Four workers known as special case workers for the blind are employed, each of whom has some degree of blindness. They assist newly blinded persons in making social adjustments needed as a result of blindness; help in giving prevocational guidance and counsel to blind persons; advise parents of blind children as to the adjustments these children need and advise and assist them in securing the services available for the blind; assist other personnel of the State Department of Public Welfare in interpreting the needs of blind persons and showing how these needs may be met.

*Vocational Rehabilitation for Blind.* Blind persons are

entitled to services by the Vocational Rehabilitation Division of the State Board of Vocational Education as are other handicapped persons. From 1923 when Vocational Rehabilitation services began in Arkansas, until January, 1947, blind persons were served along with other disabled persons by the regular rehabilitation counselors. Since January 1, 1947, blind persons have been served by four special workers who work only with the blind. This is necessary because blind persons require more time and effort for successful rehabilitation than do most other disabled individuals. During the fiscal year 1947-48 there were 226 blind persons helped.

Any blind person (20/200 or worse in the better eye with best correction) 16 years of age or over is eligible for Vocational Rehabilitation services if he does not have a vocation which is suitable for him and he or she is physically and mentally able to follow some line of work when trained and placed in employment. Rehabilitation is not feasible, however, if the blind person is unemployable because of advanced age or other conditions.

A blind person who has had work experience is eligible for service if he is unable to return to a paid job without assistance. One who has had no work experience is eligible if he is unable, because of his blindness, to prepare himself for employment in line with his education and environment.

Every applicant who is considered eligible for Vocational Rehabilitation services receives without charge a general medical examination, including standard laboratory tests. These examinations frequently indicate the need for physical restoration before training or other services are attempted. They provide the counselor with information he needs to counsel the client regarding his limitations and his capacities to follow specific training and do particular jobs.

If it appears that the physical or mental condition of the blind person can be materially improved by medical, surgical, psychiatric or other treatment to such an extent that his vocational possibilities are increased, the Division will assist in securing such treatment from qualified physicians and approved hospitals. Use of rehabilitation funds other than for training depends upon the economic need of the client



and whether or not the services needed are available from other public and private sources. If rehabilitation funds are used, only those disabilities may be treated which are relatively stable and remedial to treatment within a reasonable length of time. Hospitalization is limited to 90 days for any one disability.

When glasses, artificial eyes, or other artificial appliances are needed to improve the vocational employment of the disabled person, such prosthesis is secured from a reliable manufacturer. In this part of the program the Division participates financially only when resources are not available to the client for purchasing them. Careful supervision is given during the fitting of each appliance and for a reasonable time afterward.

A person who needs to acquire certain manual or academic skills to fit him for his chosen job is given a course of training in a public or private school or "on the job." School training facilities are selected and used on the basis of their being properly accredited by the appropriate public authority or professional organization and the provision of suitable courses needed to train the client. Other training agencies are selected if they are found to be the best available facility for the specified purpose. Fees for training, up to a reasonable amount, are paid by the Division regardless of the economic status of the individual. Books, supplies, and other costs are based on the individual's economic need.

In certain industrial accident cases, the Division recommends to the State Compensation Commission lump settlements, to enable the injured persons to go into business or take other steps in their vocational rehabilitation. In all other cases the same procedures are followed as in the rehabilitation of persons disabled through public accident or disease. Acceptance of service from the Division in no way effects a person's right to compensation.

The Division of Vocational Rehabilitation may, on the basis of economic need, assist individuals with maintenance during training or treatment for a period not to exceed 12 months, (this maintenance does not apply to students in college training) and may assist in their transportation to and from

medical treatment, fitting of appliances and training in their use.

The Division is not a placement agency, but it shares the responsibility of finding satisfactory employment with every disabled person accepted for service. The Division maintains contact with public, private and individual sources that might offer job opportunities to clients of the Division and follows up continually on performance in employment, in order to make necessary adjustments, provide further medical care, and furnish supplementary training if needed.

Vocational Rehabilitation is a public service for the civilian blind comparable to public education, public health and other activities for the welfare of the people. Its primary objective is to assist blind individuals in securing suitable employment which will enable them to become self-supporting. The state is well repaid when the individual is earning his own way and contributing skilled service to his community, state, and country.

*Arkansas Enterprises for the Blind.* The Arkansas Enterprises for the Blind is the outstanding private agency serving the blind in Arkansas. It is a nonprofit corporation supported by private donations and fees from governmental agencies for special services rendered to their clients. It operates the Vending Stand Program, Prevocational Adjustment Center for adult blind, and otherwise cooperates with the Public Welfare Department and the Vocational Rehabilitation Division.

This agency has a short but interesting history. In the spring of 1938 a Vending Stand Program was discussed by the Arkansas Association for the Blind, whose members are the alumni of the State School for the Blind. Congress had passed an act which provided that blind persons could operate vending stands in federal buildings if some state agency assumed the responsibility for licensing the operator. In March of 1939 the Department of Public Welfare agreed to assume this responsibility in cooperation with the Vocational Rehabilitation Division and what is now the Arkansas Enterprises for the Blind. The Alumni Association of the School for the Blind and the Little Rock Lions Club assisted

financially.

In 1945 Congress appropriated money to match state funds for the purchase of equipment for the Vending Stand Program. Thus the Business Enterprises for the Blind was inaugurated by the Federal Office of Vocational Rehabilitation.

To adapt this program to Arkansas, the Arkansas Enterprises for the Blind, Inc., again was utilized. Through a contractual relationship with Vocational Rehabilitation, The Arkansas Enterprises for the Blind operates the Business Enterprise Program. Through this arrangement, the Vocational Rehabilitation Division can provide stand equipment up to \$900 and reimburse the Arkansas Enterprises for the Blind for funds expended in securing locations for small businesses, designing the equipment and supervising its installation, and placing the blind person in employment. The Vocational Rehabilitation Division also pays the Arkansas Enterprises for the Blind a fee to train the blind individual who is to engage in a commercial enterprise. This income, together with the regular administrative charge of from 4 to 8 per cent made against each business enterprise, practically makes the program self-sustaining. It is planned to make it entirely self-sustaining in the next few years. All administrative cost is borne by the Arkansas Enterprises for the Blind, except for part of the salary of two stand supervisors and office rent, which is furnished by the Department of Public Welfare.

*Vocational Adjustment Center.* This is the newest service provided for the blind. It was formally opened May 3, 1947, in spacious quarters at 2812 S. Tyler Street, Little Rock. It is a project of the Arkansas Enterprises for the Blind and is sponsored by the Lions Clubs in Arkansas. The Downtown Little Rock Lions Club provided the initial investment of \$10,000. The Adjustment center now receives a major part of its support from proceeds of an annual seal sale conducted by the Lions Clubs of the state during Thanksgiving season.

In training and placing blind persons in jobs, the agencies serving them discovered that the biggest problem



was assisting the blind man or woman in making the mental, social, and personal adjustment to the transition from a sighted world to one of darkness. Many times it was just the fear of attempting to go back and forth to a job that prevented them from entering rehabilitation training.

The Center is a place where the blind trainees can live under the guidance and supervision of trained workers who assist them in making the adjustment to the loss of sight before they are placed in employment. The Center gives training that will enable the blind person to believe in himself and travel unassisted wherever he wishes, training in social adjustment that permits a return to normal, happy, everyday living, and training in occupational therapy to develop manual dexterity and co-ordination, thus preparing the individual for training, for employment, or placement in employment. Its aim is prevocational adjustment and includes training in personal care, orientation, Braille, and various types of small business enterprises, such as rug weaving, rubber mat making, leather and woodcraft.

The Vocational Rehabilitation Division approves all applicants for prevocational training at the Center where they remain from 3 to 6 months, depending on the needs of the individual. Unassisted it would take the adult blinded person 2 or 3 years to make this adjustment if at all. The Center can accommodate 20 adult blind persons. Both sexes are admitted for training.

This project was the second of its kind in the United States, and persons have come from a number of states to learn something of its program. It is approved by the Veterans Administration for the training of newly blinded veterans of World War II.

There are numerous other services available to the blind. The Arkansas Enterprises for the Blind, the Department of Public Welfare, or the Vocational Rehabilitation Division will assist any blind individual to secure them. Among these are the following:

*White Canes.* White canes are furnished free of charge by the Lions Clubs to any blind person who desires one. The use of these canes not only helps the blind person in walking,

but enables sighted persons to know of his blindness and to give assistance if necessary.

*Glasses for School Children.* In many communities in the state the local Lions Club furnishes glasses and pays for eye operations for public school children with defective vision. Many children benefit from this program who would not be eligible for public assistance, and yet whose parents are not able to afford additional expense.

*Talking Books.* The American Foundation for the Blind and the Library of Congress put out talking books. They resemble phonograph records and can be secured for electric or nonelectric machines. Both the machines and the records or books are available free of charge and may be secured through the Department of Public Welfare. There is a rather wide selection of talking books available, including novels, nonfiction, and children's books. A list of these books may be obtained on request from the Library of Congress. Postage to and from the nearest depository library is free.

*Literature in Braille.* There are 26 publications in Braille including the "Reader's Digest." These are either free or sold at cost. Seventeen religious denominations publish their literature in Braille.

*Special Travel Rates.* A blind person may secure special rates when traveling on trains or busses by applying to the American Foundation for the Blind, 15 W. 16th Street, New York 11, New York. A small photograph and 25 cents are required before a book of coupons is sent. For each coupon two tickets will be issued for the price of one.

*Seeing Eye Dogs.* The Seeing Eye was established at Morristown, New Jersey, in 1929. It educates dog guides for the blind and instructs blind men and women in their use, thus assisting in the mental as well as the physical liberation of its blind students. It has been found that through the dog, and through the educational methods used in teaching him to use the dog, a blind person is given not only physical freedom but he also regains confidence in himself, becomes more self-reliant, and assumes a healthier mental attitude toward himself, his handicap, and the world

in general.

Each blind person who goes to the Seeing Eye is asked to pay \$150. He may make his payments when and as he is able. His "down payment," or his monthly payments may be as little as \$1, but regardless of its size, it is a practical demonstration of his willingness to assume the responsibilities of independence.

*Braille Watches and Cards.* The American Foundation for the Blind provides watches at cost to blind persons. Playing cards may also be secured in Braille making it possible for a blind person to play with sighted persons.

*Braille Typewriters.* A small portable Braille typewriter may be secured through the local Lions Club by any blind person who is able to use it. The cost to the person may not exceed \$5. The remaining cost is borne by the Lions Club.

*Home for Blind Women.* This home located at 1002 S. Oak Street, Little Rock, was organized in 1930. The original board consisted of 14 women, each of whom contributed \$100 or more in cash or equipment. Each member serves until she dies or resigns. She is then succeeded by her closest female relative who is interested in the home. The board meets monthly and passes on applications to the home and reviews its financial matters.

This is a home for blind women, and it is much more like a home than an institution. The women care for their own rooms, have radios and talking books. They are free to go wherever they please except that the director likes to know where they are at all times. Several of them are graduates of the School for the Blind. Outside contacts and visitors are encouraged.

Applicants must have been a resident of Arkansas for 5 years, must be under 80 years of age, have less than 10 per cent vision, and must not use tobacco or intoxicating liquor. They must be physically capable of keeping their own rooms and of getting upstairs, since all bedrooms are on the second floor.

There is a \$250 entrance fee which may be paid in any way the applicant sees fit. Usually \$50 is paid on entrance and the rest later. There is a probationary period of



one month's residence before final acceptance. Temporary care is given to residents who pay \$1 a day for care.

In addition to entrance fees, funds are obtained from several interested groups. There is an annual budget of about \$3,000. There were six permanent and three temporary residents in August, 1947.

Arkansas has gone a long way in her task of rehabilitating the blind. Its citizens can be justly proud of its agencies and services for the blind, which compare favorably with those of the wealthiest and most progressive states in the nation.



